

*Does Comedy News Enhance Political & Environmental Literacy?*

Sustainability Problems Debate #2

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## Introduction

Throughout history media has encountered several major disruptive innovations, the first being the printing press. The printing press, “the great-grandfather” of mass media, was the first in a series of innovative technologies that allowed humans to enhance the reach of messages to large audiences. The next major innovation was the radio. While writing can transport some level of emotion from the author to the reader, the radio significantly multiplied the effect of emotion in mass communication. Near instantaneously, an empowered individual could broadcast her or his message to the masses. Soon after the radio, film and analog television further enhanced broadcast abilities. As you can see, the trend in mass media was that every innovation was incrementally increasing the effectiveness of communication. In the 1990’s, digital television and the internet revolutionized mass communication. It had never been easier to convey a message to a large audience. The battle for media outlets reignited, massive multinational corporations were buying and selling websites, television stations, newspapers, and magazines like they were commodities. The existing mass-media complex in the United States became a monster, and the citizens became the prey. Comedy news is an evolved form of political cartoons, or as some may say, humorous propaganda.

## Argument

The argument at hand is that comedy enhances political and environmental literacy. More often than not, liberal democrats would agree with this statement. They advocate that men like John Stuart and Stephen Colbert bring truth to the citizens. Conservative republicans generally stand against the idea that comedy enhances media literacy. Conservative idols, like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, tend to be more aggressive, rather than comedic or humorous. Saying that characters like Stuart and Colbert are jokes. Thus detracting from true literacy.

## Stakeholders

So we know that the monsters are the news corporations, and that the prey is society, but what external forces contribute the imbalance of power? The answer is politics, politics, and of course more politics. “Politically affiliated” news networks will most likely always be the norm. So what comes to the prey’s defense? The answer is comedy say the comedians and much of the American republic. The stakeholders are as follows:

- Corporations, businesses, and media outlets.
  - News Corporations
    - Traditional
      - Conservative (like FOX)
      - Liberal (like NBC)
  - Comedy News
  - Large Influential Corporations
  - Independent Media Outlets

- Political Parties
  - Republicans
  - Democrats
  - Libertarians, Green Party, Etc.\*
- The American Public
  - Conservative Republicans
  - Liberal Democrats
  - Libertarians, independents, Etc.\*

\*This list represents only the most prominent forces in this argument, there are many other positions on the spectrum that have a negligible impact. The asterisk marks the groups that have a smaller stake in the argument

The following sections will provide further in-depth analysis of the varying viewpoints. The aim of this is to try to answer the question of whether comedy does in fact enhance political and environmental literacy. The text will be complemented by my unique position.

## **Affirmative Position**

### **Overview**

As stated in the introduction, modern comedy news is an evolved form of political cartoon. Political cartoons have been used widespread in the United States since the colonial era. They were used for grabbing viewers' attention, conveying emotion, visualizing propaganda, and pointing out absurdities in government policy. Although the broadcasting medium has changed significantly with ever-changing technologies, the reason for creating such humorous messages has for the most part remained the same. So what makes comedy news so effective? The answer is simple: it makes news more compelling by framing it in a different context. In other words, viewers see the information from an alternative angle. It is well known that Americans have a very strong desire to be entertained, and with American's fast-paced lifestyle it makes sense to combine entertainment and news into a single message. Comedy news attracts individuals seeking information, seeking entertainment, and a combination of the two. In some cases, comedy news is the only place where individuals keep up with current events. Another advantage to the use of comedy news is its ability to cater to a broad audience. The context in which information is conveyed is attractive to not only the youth and young adults, but also many adults and elderly across various ethnic and diverse backgrounds. Comedy news has the unique ability to attract demographics, like the youth, who do not typically have a strong interest in political or environmental issues. Thus, if used correctly, comedy news can serve as an effective introduction to political and environmental issues. Finally, comedy news is simply another fish in the sea when it comes to perspectives. Television, newspapers, blogs, and forums are all mediums for broadcasting information. A comedic spin off of these sources attracts viewers from all different perspectives, exposing them to political and environmental issues they would not have been exposed to otherwise. Therefore enhancing political

literacy. In the following paragraphs I have provided more in-depth examples of how comedy enhances political and environmental literacy.

## **Examples**

### **John Stuart and Politics<sup>1</sup>**

In regards to modern day comedy news, John Stuart is the king. A king that is adamant about not being regarded as a journalist. His goal is to point out the absurdities of the government and politicians' flawed decision-making rationale. His unique approach to providing his perspective on politics has attracted millions of viewers and inspired many others to pursue comedy news as a means of expression. Not only does John Stuart mock the hot news topics of the day, he also brings attention to many political events and scandals that would otherwise slide through the cracks. His method of deconstructing both videos and articles is entertaining and informative. When conducting live interviews he attempts to squeeze candid responses out of his guests. John Stuart is an excellent example of a highly intellectual individual who uses comedy as a means to share his perspective and expose political issues. Doing so in an entertaining way, and reaching very large audiences.

### **The Yes Men and the Environment<sup>2</sup>**

The Yes Men are notorious for bringing attention to a wide variety of environmental and political issues. By pretending to be spokespeople for various organizations, the Yes Men are able to push absurd ideas even farther in a comical way. Often the crowds accept these ridiculous solutions. In other instances, the Yes Men will provide people with the answers that they deserve to hear, illustrating that a solution is not all that difficult to come up with. In the case of the Union Carbide/Dow Chemical disaster, one of the Yes Men posed as a Dow spokesperson and told the world during a BBC interview that Dow was accepting full responsibility for the cleanup of the fallout zone and the medical care for the victims. While often corporations do not end up making the right decision in preventing or rectifying bad decisions, the Yes Men are able to attract attention to this irresponsibility.

## **Flaws**

While comedy news does have significant support in that it enhances political and environmental literacy, it does have some minor flaws. In some circumstances the use of comedy may downplay the severity of an issue. It can also serve as a distraction to viewers. Like all news, comedy news does have its biases. The biggest flaw is that comedy news tends to highlight the bad and ignore the good; but this is

simply due to the nature of comedy. It is hard to make a joke about something that is good.

## **Negative Position**

### **Overview**

The basis for disagreement that comedy news does not enhance political and environmental literacy plays off of the flaws of the affirmative position. Instead of enhancing literacy it creates confusion, a poor foundation on important issues, and stronger biases. Rather than ingesting unbiased information, the viewers are being fed one-sided information in the form of jokes, which makes the viewer more likely to take in the information and less likely to question the points being made. The points that are being made are presented to a group of people who already feel the way that Jon Stewart and Colbert do. Those who do not agree with what these comedians are saying are the ones who should be reached, but the shows do not do a good job of reaching out to the people on the opposite side who are the ones who need to be persuaded. The viewers of these television programs are usually liberal democrat supporters who are taking in more democratic opinions. Comedy news mocks very serious issues, distracts viewers from accurate information, and highlights only the bad events that occur. Overall, critics claim that comedy news is mere entertainment; viewers are more interested in the information being funny than being accurate or nonbiased.

### **Examples**

#### **The John Stuart Game<sup>3</sup>**

Many argue that John Stuart solely partakes in comedy news to take advantage of peoples desire to be entertained. Using his media presence to obtain gifts and praise. Critics call him a disingenuous bully. He claims he is a comedian to mask his highly political and personal agenda. Stuart chooses topics to discuss that will yield favorite outcomes for him.

#### **Very Political Joke<sup>4</sup>**

"I find it very disturbing that people who say they really care about voting and making real change in DC will be taking thousands of people away for a comedy show, when they should be working in their respective communities to make sure that change comes in November" said Kevin Wardally a Democratic consultant. This was in response to John Stuart and Stephen Colbert's proposed rally for three days before the 2010-midterm elections. Another person commented, "It's just like everything they do – it's really for the joke." Comments like these point out how comedy news does not have a

place in politics. Critics argue that John Stuart organized this rally to represent his political views. Others argue that this rally was intended to build hype for John Stuart's upcoming book and to take advantage of the new young voters who tend to be democrats.

## **Flaws**

The main point that the negative position makes is that comedy news presents biased information to a narrow audience. How does this differ from many news sources? This thought process assumes that a completely nonbiased news source must exist. Secondly, the negative position criticizes comedians for having personal agendas. This is simply the nature of humans. Third, critics claim that comedy is a distraction and downplays the seriousness of issues. Comedy is simply another means of communication; it simply plays upon emotions that are not typically associated with political or environmental issues. Finally, the main flaw of the negative position is that it could be applied to any secondary news source; blogs, magazines, newspapers, etc. The criticisms of comedy news only represent flaws in mass communication as a whole.

## **Extension of Argument: Comedy News in Academia<sup>5</sup>**

Beyond being attractive to the general American public, comedy news has become a hot topic in education. Schools across the United States are using political satirists like Stephen Colbert and John Stuart as the subjects of courses and seminars. Political science, journalism, philosophy, race relations, communication, theology, linguistics, and rhetoric are just some of the disciplines incorporating comedy news into their curriculums. In addition, there have been dozens of instances where comedy news has been the topic of academic writing; including: journals, dissertations, essays, and books. "The Colbert Report and its host have compelled the people who study political communications to take entertainment TV seriously and the people who study entertainment and popular culture to think more about politics," said Geoffrey Baym, a media studies professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Stephen Colbert and John Stuart represent a unique interdisciplinary career path of politics, comedy, activism, education, entertainment, and news. While some will still say that comedy news does not enhance political and environmental literacy, it has created new academic and career opportunities.

## **Personal Perspective**

I strongly believe that comedy news enhances political, environmental, and media literacy. While in a perfect world, a single, accurate, unbiased, and trustworthy news source would be optimal, it is unlikely to ever be attainable. Any additional perspective in the media allows individuals to more accurately form their own beliefs and ideas. Comedy news is unique in the way that it attracts a demographic that would not otherwise be interested in political or environmental issues. Comedy news also points out many absurdities and scandals that traditional news programs are unwilling to share. Best of all, comedy news is

not biased in nature. A funny person with good content is a funny person with good content. Comedy as a career is an extremely diverse field, with a very diverse background of comedians. As stated earlier, comedy news is the evolved form of the political cartoon. It is a means of communication, expression, and entertainment. In my opinion, it is a very effective at enhancing political and environmental literacy. It is a positive way to address big issues. Comedy news is not all about jokes, it is about using a popular form of entertainment to inform.

## Citations

<sup>1</sup>Smith, Chris. "America Is a Joke." *NYMag.com*. New York Magazine, 12 Oct. 2010. Web. 18 Oct. 2012. <<http://nymag.com/arts/tv/profiles/68086/>>.

<sup>2</sup>*Bill Moyers Talks with The Yes Men*. Perf. Bill Moyers, ANDY BICHLBAUM, MIKE BONANNO. *Bill Moyers Journal*. PBS, 13 July 2007. Web. 18 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/07202007/watch.html>>.

<sup>3</sup>Welch, Matt. "The "Jon Stewart Game": Everyone Loses, Except Him!" *Reason.com*. Reason, 19 Sept. 2011. Web. 18 Oct. 2012. <<http://reason.com/blog/2011/09/19/the-jon-stewart-game-everyone>>.

<sup>4</sup>Smith, Ben, and Keach Hagey. "Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Very Political 'joke'" *POLITICO*. Politico, 20 Sept. 2010. Web. 18 Oct. 2012. <[http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0910/42447\\_Page3.html](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0910/42447_Page3.html)>.

<sup>5</sup>Farhi, Paul. "Truthinessology: The Stephen Colbert Effect Becomes an Obsession in Academia." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 10 July 2012. Web. 18 Oct. 2012. <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/truthinessology-the-stephen-colbert-effect-becomes-an-obsession-in-academia/2012/07/09/gJQAYgiHZW\\_story\\_1.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/truthinessology-the-stephen-colbert-effect-becomes-an-obsession-in-academia/2012/07/09/gJQAYgiHZW_story_1.html)>.

<sup>6</sup>Chinni, Dante. "Politics Counts: The Impact of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert." *WSJ.com*. T=The Wall Street Journal, 17 Feb. 2012. Web. 18 Oct. 2012. <<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2012/02/17/politics-counts-the-impact-of-jon-stewart-and-stephen-colbert/>>.